

Touched By The 'Spirit'?

by Richard T. Ritenbaugh

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One of the more fascinating trends in the world today is the rise and expansion of the Pentecostal movement in this world's Christianity. More than any other religious persuasion, Pentecostalism is sweeping not only American Protestants into "spiritual ecstasy," but it is also making serious inroads around the globe. It is gaining twice as many adherents as the much ballyhooed surge in Islamic fundamentalism.

Though Pentecostalism has advanced most readily among the urban poor, it is not confined to them. Pentecostal churches can be found in rural areas, in affluent neighborhoods, in immigrant enclaves, in racially mixed areas, etc. No group seems to have been bypassed by its expansion. It has even made substantial numbers of converts in traditionally non-Christian countries like India, South Korea, Brazil and communist Russia.

Why is this significant to those of us in God's church? The Pentecostal movement may not affect us personally, but the Bible suggests that, at the end time, religious fervor will increase. People will get to the point that they are willing to worship the Beast, partially as a result of the deceptive "miracles" done in his presence (Revelation 13:13-14; 19:20; II Thessalonians 2:9).

Biblical Roots?

Pentecostalism purportedly has its roots in Acts 2:1-4:

Now when the Day of Pentecost had fully come, they were all with one accord in one place. And suddenly there came a sound from heaven, as of a rushing mighty wind, and it filled the whole house where they were sitting. Then there appeared to them divided tongues, as of fire, and one sat upon each of them. And they were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance.

Pentecostals believe that they, too, can speak in tongues as the "spirit" moves them, and by all accounts, it moves them often. Their services are loud and confusing, as each person "surrenders" himself to the spirit and begins to mumble, sing, shout or shriek predominately unintelligible "words."

"Worshippers . . . surrender to their own incomprehensible incantations," writes Larry Tye in "Pentecostal Churches Mushroom Around Globe" (*The Charlotte Observer*, December 11, 1994). "No one knows what it means; they only know they're speaking in a trance-like tongue that flows from their souls."

Even the normally restrained English have been caught in Pentecostalism's grip. Martin Wroe, a reporter for the *London Observer*, describes a typical Pentecostal service in Britain:

At the Queens Road Baptist Church, Wimbledon, in south London last week, the congregation was rolling in the aisles. Rolling and weeping and laughing and sometimes just lying there, moaning, wailing, but in no pain.

No one was barking, but elsewhere, in other churches, they sometimes bark, crow like cockerels, moo like cows, paw the ground like bulls and, more commonly, roar like lions. . . .

A primitive Pentecostalism is breaking out in sophisticated Anglican churches throughout Britain. Tens of thousands of British churchgoers are experiencing the "Toronto Blessing," a wave of ecstatic and eccentric spiritual activity said to have originated at a church in Toronto and brought to this country by evangelical pilgrims. (*The Washington Times*, September 10, 1994)

Analysts of this trend have wondered what the appeal of Pentecostalism is. Larry Tye believes it is the energy level of the worship service combined with individualism of the spirit's "touch." He writes:

Worshippers almost never sit still or keep quiet, joining with the choir even when it is ad-libbing, shouting "that's right" and "come on, preacher," when he delivers his sermon and, when they speak in tongues, twitching and turning in the pews, then in the aisles.

Even the theology is high-pitched and personal. The Holy Spirit, for instance, plays a more important role in the Pentecostal church than any other, and is seen as a spirit that touches people, empowers them and doesn't need a minister to mediate. . . .

It's this energetic worship that Pentecostals say fills the spiritual vacuum left by an increasingly cold, rational world.

Pentecostals believe speaking in tongues is "evidence of a divinely inspired experience." It is an act of worship that "can't be fully appreciated or comprehended by intellect alone," says Allen Callahan, an assistant professor at Harvard Divinity School as well as a Pentecostal. "One of the things that embracing the Pentecostal experience means is that you accept mystery."

Very interesting! Toward the end of the first century, the true gospel of Jesus Christ and His true church were being suppressed and slowly engulfed by a religious movement called Gnosticism. One of its condemning features is that it combined certain elements of Christianity with the "mystery religions" extant at the time. These "mysteries" involved secret societies, rituals, levels of understanding and strange practices like "a gripping religious ecstasy" and being "possessed by the god."

Could history be repeating itself? Possibly so, with a few modern twists.

A Search for Spirituality

Some Catholics are also becoming more mystical." Visions of the "Virgin Mary" are increasing. A Virginia couple, Ted and Maureen Flynn, has recently written a book, *The Thunder of Justice*, in which they chronicle the numerous messages that they received from Mary. "Mary, the Flynn's wrote, has been chosen by God to warn all people to prepare for the second coming of Christ by her prophecies, delivered to people in apparitions and internal messages" (*The Washington Times*, November 19, 1994).

Eastern Orthodox churches are having to deal with parishioners delving into the occult. In some areas, New Age retailers cannot keep an inventory of facsimile holy icons and symbols because

Orthodox Christians buy them out. "The Orthodox appeal," says one periodical, the *Utne Reader*, "lies in the fact that it is a Christian tradition that is also distinctively 'Eastern'" (*The Washington Times*, December 10, 1994).

And it gets stranger. A recent poll reveals that even though nine out of ten Americans believe in a "supreme being, a deity," twenty percent also believe in astrology. This number becomes more significant when we realize there are twenty times more astrologers in America than astronomers and ninety percent of American newspapers carry an astrology forecast. Four of ten Americans say they talk to the dead, and thirty-six percent of these say the dead speak back. Forty percent of our youths believe in UFOs, and fifteen percent of New Orleans residents believe in voodoo.

Amos prophesied of such a search for religious fulfillment in Amos 8:11-13:

"Behold, the days are coming," says the Lord God, "that I will send a famine on the land, not a famine of bread, nor a thirst for water, but of *hearing the words of the Lord*. They shall wander from sea to sea, and from north to east; they shall run to and fro, seeking the word of the Lord, but shall not find it. In that day the fair virgins and strong young men shall faint from thirst."

Because the truth has not been preached in this land, the people, especially the young, are seeking "spirituality" wherever they can find it. We can only expect this to increase as time moves forward since the churches show no signs of returning to "the faith which was once delivered unto the saints" (Jude 3, KJV). In fact, a significant number of churches provide a smorgasbord of religious "truth" that they have "borrowed from all great religions" (*Rocky Mountain News*, December 19, 1994).

Jesus and Paul both spoke of this spirit of deception. Jesus says in Matthew 24:11, "Then many false prophets will rise up and deceive many." Paul echoes this in II Timothy 3:13: "But evil men and impostors will grow worse and worse, deceiving and being deceived." So we, members of God's true church at the end time, live in an age of deception.

What do we do? In the next verse Paul gives us some advice: "But as for you, continue in the things which you have learned and been assured of, knowing from whom you have learned them" (verse 14). If we truly believe—are truly convicted of—the knowledge God has bestowed upon us through His true and faithful ministers, we will not be shaken by the deceptions that are here now, nor by the ones to come.

But we cannot get too confident! Christ says, "For false christs and false prophets will arise and show great signs and wonders, so as to deceive, if possible, *even the elect*" (Matthew 24:24). We also need to be strengthening our relationship with God so we will have the faith to turn to Him for help in resisting the coming deceptions.

The Pentecostal spirit is one we do not want to have. It takes little spiritual acumen to realize that its spirit does not come from God (I Corinthians 14:33, 40). But if we are indeed His children, we have the Holy Spirit of God, which is a Spirit "of power and of love and of a sound mind" (II Timothy 1: 7). Let us use it, not for some temporary, ecstatic feeling, but to lay hold of our promised inheritance, eternal life in God's Kingdom (Philippians 3:12-14)!